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Kava chameleons

A drink that is a revered part of Pacific culture is under threat from US-grown crops and heady new mixes. **BY PETE McKENZIE**

"All right, we're back with the Coke-Pepsi challenge," said Jeffrey Bowman as he stood behind the counter at The Nak, his kava bar in Boca Raton, Florida. Oversized tiki heads grimaced from a nearby wall as he raised a small red bowl of purple-brown liquid and toasted four Americans who sat along the counter opposite him. "Bula, bula. American kava."

Together, they downed their mix of Coke and kava, a psychoactive drink that has long been fundamental to indigenous culture in the Pacific. "Damn, that's not so bad," said one man, who made a thumbs-up gesture towards the camera, with which Bowman was filming, later posting the clip to social media. "It lightens the kava." One woman in full denim smiled nervously. "I like it," she said. Another woman in a Yosemite tank top enthused: "It makes it taste creamier."

"See! America!" said Bowman. Later, after trying a Pepsi version, he decided, "The Coca-Cola does make a superior kava product. That's all from American kava today. You should really try some American Coca-Cola and Pepsi in your kava while you're making it: it works out great."

Depending on your perspective, this experimentation with kava was either brilliant American innovation or a form of cultural blasphemy. That is a tension with which Bowman, a sturdy middle-aged Floridian, is intimately familiar.

After founding America's first kava bar in 2001, he has become a leading proponent of kava consumption, helping drive the drink much closer to the US mainstream. Yet his advocacy has often involved things that people in the Pacific find uncomfortable, like liberal use of exaggerated and stereotypical tiki, the addition of flavours to the kava such as cola mixers, and the sale of addictive drugs alongside (or, it appears, in) kava.

That tension became particularly acute this year when Bowman and two US partners revealed they had grown and harvested usable kava roots – with which the drink is made – in mainland America for the first time. In the coming years, they aim to turn kava farming in the US into a fully fledged commercial enterprise, which Bowman says is essential to developing kava into a global business.

Faced with these developments, experts are expressing concern about the impact of foreign competitors on Pacific growers, raising fears about what US-grown kava could mean for the plant's cultural significance. They point out a worrying reliance by US kava enthusiasts on a different psychoactive plant with addictive properties that threatens to plunge the industry into a new era of stigma and suspicion.

Now, a global fight has broken out over the future of the Pacific's most iconic drink. Bowman declined to speak with the *Listener*, but in a recent Facebook post, he insisted, "I don't cut down anything people of the South Pacific do. I am in fact one of their biggest supporters." That said, he

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Kava being served at Brooklyn Kava in New York, where the drink is promoted as "soothing the stress of NY millennials".

added, "Capitalism has come for kava. Nothing anyone can do about it."

PACIFIC WIDE

For roughly three millennia, kava has been integral to cultures throughout the Pacific. When crushed and combined with water, the psychoactive root creates a drink whose chalky flavour belies the intense calm it generates. Where alcohol excites, kava calms, and its most commonly exported variety causes no hangover. As a result, it is drunk in practically every Pacific context, from religious ceremonies to social gatherings.

The plant's centrality extends to economics. To understand its importance, it is useful to consider Vanuatu, one of the root's largest producers, where kava bars speckle almost every city street and residents grow it in their backyards. "You cannot imagine this place without kava," says Michael Louzé, chairman of the Vanuatu Kava Industry Association. "It's the heart of the country."

For many Pacific nations like Vanuatu, kava is the only real path to economic development. "We have limited resources, no mining, no oil, we are outside the main trading routes, and with the limited land available and high cost of production, we will never be able to really compete," Louzé says.

"Kava is our real chance, and for the first time, our farmers have a crop really empowering them, unlike colonial crops from before like copra, coffee or cocoa."

The data supports Louzé. In 2019, Vanuatu's farmers exported A$48.4 million (NZ$52.7m) worth of the root, comprising more than half of the country's exports and helping to sustain 30,000 households in the country of 342,000 people. Most of those exports go to other Pacific countries like New Caledonia and Fiji, but an increasing share is going to the US, Australia and New Zealand, where kava consumption is on the rise. (It's estimated that 30,000 people here drink kava).

Given that economic importance, according to Louzé, Ni-Vanuatu and other Pacific growers are tracking the news from Florida closely. "They have spread the fear to the small farmers who are relying 100% on kava cultivation for their cash need."

Louzé says he is unconcerned. "It is not happening! A buzz," he says of the efforts by Bowman and other US growers. "If Hawai'i, with perfect kava soil and climate, hasn't been able, despite million-dollar projects and mechanisation, to produce kava competitively, there is no way that Florida will."

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Others are taking the threat more seriously. "This will ultimately take money from our kava-growing families, many of whom are smallhold farmers," says Apo Aporosa, a senior lecturer in health at Waikato University who specialises in kava. "At the national level, 'foreign' kava farming also threatens Pacific kava exports and [by extension] GDP."

Bowman has expressed frustration with this attitude. "I don't understand the mentality of some of these people. We have been working hard for 20-plus years to sell their kava so they have better lives and now they suddenly want to stop progress and go backwards," he wrote earlier this year in an online group called American Kava Culture.

To Bowman and his American collaborators, the growth of kava in the mainland US is an opportunity for Pacific farmers. A year ago, Tyler Blythe, the owner of Root of Happiness kava bar in California and a co-founder with Bowman of American Kava Growers, wrote of "the vast economic opportunities ahead for the South Pacific as the American Kava Growing industry opens new doors that previously didn't exist. For example, imagine the new demand for Kava consultants, expert growers, farm workers that a market the size of America opens up.

"There will be a huge demand for not only consultants, farmers, experts, but also cultural educators – all paid at western wages," added Blythe, who did not respond to a request for an interview. "You can either view this as competition or collaboration. We view it as a collaboration that will significantly benefit the South Pacific in a vast number of ways."

"Kava is a kratom-dominated industry. None of the kava bars in the US sell enough kava to survive.

STIGMA DEPRESSES APPEAL

Kava experts' fears go beyond the idea that American growers could compete with Pacific farmers. Some fear the Americans pose an existential threat to the industry as a whole.

This fear is rooted in history. In the late 90s and early 2000s, after a wave of Western interest in the drug, there were multiple reports in Germany and other European countries of severe liver damage associated with kava use.

Modern studies indicate that the drug is safe and non-addictive when prepared traditionally and taken in moderate doses: researchers speculate that people in Germany may have used the plant's toxic leaves or stem; they may have been sold a less-common, harmful variant called "tudei" kava or roots that had not been properly cleaned; that the cases might have involved rare allergies; or that the drink could have been cut with alcohol. The latter occurred in Australia, which reported people using kava at 100 times the recommended dosage and mixing it with ethanol.

Kava has long been integral to Pacific cultural and social gatherings.

Germany and France banned kava in the early 2000s. Australia's government followed in 2007 by blocking commercial imports. The US Food and Drug Administration warned of health risks from the product. The result was widespread stigma about kava in Western nations that has long depressed its appeal.

Interest has picked back up only recently. Several kava bars – including The Nak – opened in the US in places including Florida, California and New York.

That is in part through careful efforts in the Pacific to improve the quality of kava exports. Vanuatu, for example, has passed stringent laws holding kava producers to a high standard, to ensure that harmful variants or improperly cleaned kava does not get shipped out.

Now, however, experts like Aporosa fear the behaviour of US kava producers could lead to another industry collapse. In particular, Aporosa points to US kava bars' use and sale of kratom, an unrelated psychoactive plant from Southeast Asia.

While kratom has long been advertised as a natural treatment for opioid withdrawals, health professionals have raised significant concerns about its use. According to a 2023 investigation by the *Tampa Bay Times*, at least 580 people in Florida alone have died from kratom-related overdoses over the past decade. Less severe effects range from chronic agitation and debilitating withdrawals to liver damage and seizures.

For American kava producers, however, kratom has become essential to their business. According to data gathered by Jimmy Price, an independent kava researcher, of the roughly 400 kava bars in the US, just 14% did not also sell kratom.

Speaking to Bloomberg last year, Bowman said kratom was essential to US kava bars' business model. "Kava is a kratom-dominated industry," he said. "None of the kava bars in the United States sell enough kava to survive."

Experts like Aporosa have subsequently raised concerns that operators like Bowman are not only selling kratom alongside kava, but also mixing the two products together. Bowman has strongly denied this accusation. "Claims that we are mixing kratom into kava are totally wrong," he told the *Fiji Times*.

Promotional material from the Kava Coalition, a separate group of which Bowman is also an important member, tells a different story. On the group's website, a video featuring Bowman explains: "Kava, a naturally derived beverage, is commonly blended with other organic ingredients to enhance its flavour profile and effects. One such ingredient is leaf kratom, which is typically consumed for productivity enhancement. Mixing kava and leaf kratom offers a sense of calm energy."

"This type of behaviour could trigger another kava ban and negatively impact the Pacific.

In a separate post on American Kava Culture, Bowman responded to someone asking about mixing kava and kratom by saying, "Kratom is not close to being banned in America. Keep dreaming. Yes it's true some kava bars mix kratom in the kava but kratom is legal my man."

When these issues were put to Bowman, he responded by email, "Sorry I don't have time for this. All the best to you."

PROTECTIONS SOUGHT

In the weeks after the US kava growers' announcement that they had harvested the root for the first time, many experts suggested pursuing new protections for Pacific growers. Some suggested registering intellectual property protections with the World Trade Organisation that would prevent roots grown outside the Pacific from being advertised as kava, in much the same way that Champagne protects its regional rights: if it's not bubbly from Champagne, it's sparkling wine.

Such protections, however, look increasingly unlikely. Asked last month by the *Fiji Times* about the mixing of kava and kratom, Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka said, "This latest form of kava adulteration [with substances like kratom], and I would also suggest the growing of kava outside of the Pacific, has the potential to initiate a second ban." Despite that concern, he later told media that "the days of market protection are over" and that Pacific growers simply had to outcompete American farmers.

For experts like Aporosa, leaving kava's future to the free market isn't enough. He describes the US growers' approach as a "clever, boastful and exaggerated diversionary narrative and spin about economic growth and benefits for the Pacific, all aimed at drawing attention away from their dangerous and unethical practice of addictive kratom peddling".

He told the *Listener*: "This type of behaviour could trigger another kava ban and negatively impact the Pacific."

Of US kava growers, he says, "They're sowing misery and addiction." ▮